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ABSTRACT

This speech presents a teacher's account of the implementation of the Standards of Excellence Program in a Denver, Colorado, elementary school. Eight questions from the assessment instrument are cited that prompted the staff to reevaluate the educational program. Results of the assessment were analyzed by a committee, and objectives were set by consensus. Data analysis was used for the selection of appropriate teaching levels and materials, and school-wide norms were established. Other efforts to assimilate Standards of Excellence into the school program included (1) improved curricular congruence of spelling instruction; (2) direct instruction with specific objectives; (3) school-wide activities to enhance the academic program; (4) discussion, in faculty meetings, of current literature, teaching techniques, and district-wide issues; (5) team teaching; (6) renewed emphasis on homework; (7) special help for low-scoring students and high expectations for all; (8) emphasis in staff training on affective needs of students; and (9) a collaborative committee, consisting of teachers, parents, and citizens, to oversee school affairs. The success of the Standards of Excellence Program resulted primarily from its emphasis on sharing of data and on staff participation in setting goals and implementing the plan. (TE)

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STANDARDS OF EXCELLENCE
by Karen Anne Campbell, Ph.D.

Speech Delivered to The American Association of Supervision
and Curriculum Development, Chicago, Illinois, March, 1985.

A review of the literature on effective schools defines ten categories of quality indicators. I'm sure you'll recognize the ideas as I describe the implementation of the Standards of Excellence in my school.

First, we did the assessment (with no small amount of grumbling, I might add). We thought that we were "above" the rest and our daily efforts already required "more of us" and provided better results than anything "directed from downtown." But the assessment itself forced us to renew our efforts and caused us to reach a consensus of objectives. The teaching modules helped us become more effective.

I will read some of the questions which made us reevaluate our educational program. I'll ask that you imagine everyone on your staff trying to answer these questions. For each characteristic or condition described, we were to rate (from definitely a characteristic to not a characteristic, on a five-point scale) the degree the descriptor was true for our situation. I have selected questions from the assessment instruments of characteristics of effective classrooms which describe the role of the classroom teacher.

1. The teacher spends a large portion of time on direct instruction.
2. The teacher requires on-task behavior from students.
3. The teacher indicates the aims of the lesson clearly to the students.
4. The teacher structures the lessons with an introduction, presentation, practice and review.
5. The teacher remains on task with an academic focus.
6. The teacher starts and ends lessons on time.
7. The teacher monitors and adjusts to students' learning of material.
8. The teacher establishes appropriate classroom conduct early and enforces it quickly.

In all, there were 19 characteristics supported with specific examples of teacher-behavior which were assessed as important indicators of effective classrooms. The results

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of the assessment were analyzed by a committee within our building, and we set objectives by consensus. Following the teaching modules shared by our principal or through presentations by our teacher-peers, we were all quite aware of the standards of excellence by which we would be measured.

Two indicators of quality classrooms are the use of assessment and frequent monitoring and feedback of student progress. A strong component of Standards of Excellence is the focus on data analysis. We used that approach for the selection of appropriate teaching levels and materials, particularly for reading and math. We advanced some students beyond grade level using evidence from multiple sources and had highly successful results. We also provided specific remediation for others.

1. We engaged in flexible grouping for skill acquisition (both multi-grade level and within each classroom).
2. Teachers became better informed about interpretation of scores on standardized tests.
3. Prior to the Standards of Excellence program, I would guess that many teachers were unable to explain item analysis and quartiles to parents. Grade equivalents were often wrongly interpreted.
4. We used the five-week results from ALPAS intervals to form skill groups. ALPAS is a computer-scored criterion-referenced testing program developed by the Denver Public Schools.
5. We could explain the results of tests honestly and completely. Parents were able to understand the scores and help their children with skill deficits while supporting our educational objectives.

Establishing school-wide norms was a significant factor for each school. I should stress here that although the Standards of Excellence program was structured for all elementary schools, its chief emphasis was diverse implementation at each local school. Schools were allowed to choose which areas they needed to work on, and three goals were written. I was a teacher of grades 5 and 6 for the past three years. This year, I am working as a teacher on special assignment. My responsibilities include offering assistance to any elementary school for implementation of district policies and procedures. This has given me the chance to see our school system from a district-perspective, a much broader view than I had before. I see the impact of the Standards of Excellence in all of the schools:

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1. There are test scores displayed in front halls and classrooms.
2. Objectives are written on chalkboards and in parent handbooks.
3. There is a varied emphasis for programs and budgets from school to school.

But everyone is working toward educational objectives!

Curricular congruence and instructional effectiveness are two other indicators of quality schools. We found that our approach to teaching spelling was incongruent to testing and learning or application. Through item analysis, we decided that the problem was greater than a mis-match between teaching and testing. We needed to apply spelling skills to daily writing and proofreading, so we emphasized creative writing and grammatical-syntactical lessons in classwork and homework. At the upper grades, we secured the aide of two qualified parents to help correct the tremendous quantities of written material generated weekly by our students.

We were conscious of the use of time, and we concentrated on direct instruction of specific objectives rather than using student-time for seatwork. Students often worked in small groups which allowed frequent interaction and involvement. "Teaching to the objective," "sponge activities," and "time on task" were mentioned so often at school that parents reported they were being challenged by their children to do the same at home.

We encouraged efforts of our student council which enhanced the academic program. One example was using footprints," which were small paper shapes of a foot to be awarded to classes when they were engaged in appropriate learning behaviors. These were given by any adult in the building other than the classroom teacher. The winning class received a prize. Another example of something suggested by the students was the random ringing of the school bell at which time everyone (even the secretary and custodian) stopped other activities and read silently for five minutes. This encouraged kids to keep a book with them at all times, providing appropriate work to do when they had finished their assignments (often an excuse for wasting valuable time and creating diversionary activities and discipline problems). Such events must be changed frequently because they lose their motivational impact when the novelty wears thin. When offered occasionally, however, such activities enliven the enthusiasm and spirit of school.

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We devoted time in weekly faculty meetings to review journal articles. One teacher who is painfully shy and sadly burnt-out took her turn and gained confidence when the discussion following her presentation was animated and professionally stimulating. I'm sure it was the first time she had sought and received such recognition.

We increased our discussion of techniques which worked, and those which did not, and we shared the specific problems we were having with instruction and students (not as part of lounge gripe-sessions, but with problem-solving approaches and coaching). It became "in" to discuss district-wide issues and current literature, and participation on committees and enrollment in inservice classes increased.

Our building is of a modified-open design, and we made use of its structure for some teachers to team, thus meeting the instructional needs of students and providing the opportunity to observe in each other's classrooms. For example, I would hear an approach or phrase which sounded good and apply it to my teaching. We could reinforce the standards and rules of the other teachers and present a unified front to our students.

Homework received Board of Education emphasis and is an integral part of our academic program. It is important that students can do the assignments independently and that the homework has a direct relationship to the curriculum and actual lessons taught each day. Parents seem to appreciate this way of monitoring the sequence of their child's learning. Homework is always corrected so that children perceive the importance of their assignments, but I did not always record the homework grades because I felt that homework should allow an opportunity for practice and experimentation.

Research has told us that quality schools set high expectations for all students, and that a good school climate is essential for learning. Teachers must be able to teach and students must be able to learn. We identified the children whose test scores were at the lower quartile, and we provided special help for them. But we believed that they could learn and held them to high standards. Some schools have Saturday sessions (with the endorsement of parents) for those boys and girls who think they can ignore school rules and standards. The discipline in the whole school changes when children get the message that we take learning seriously. We display a positive attitude toward and about students. Demeaning comments are not tolerated nor heard. Our building is beautiful, and principals and

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building committees throughout the city have been encouraged to add plants, color, and conversation areas. They have been given help with bulletin board ideas. There is a District-based effort to create schools with a comfortable, safe, and pleasant climate.

By consensus, we adopted a specific program to meet the affective needs of our children. The entire staff and some of their spouses, the secretary, custodians, aides, cooks, and numerous parents volunteered three Friday evenings from 5:00-10:00 p.m. for training. We maintained a notebook of evaluative comments and ditto masters for the use of other teachers as we used and created materials and lessons. Everyone in the building was using the same terminology:

- no put downs
- active listening
- the right to pass.

Parents supported our efforts and children became comfortable with the format. Our team of 5/6 teachers made morning appointments with individual children to discuss their behavior or peer problems. We set up secret signals with each child to encourage their efforts or warn them of their limits. These children seemed to appreciate the attention and opportunity to meet teachers in this personal way.

A Discipline Hearing Committee was established. It was comprised of three teachers who worked as intermediaries for a teacher and a child having behavior problems. Teachers served for three weeks. This informal group allowed a forum for the exchange of intervention strategies, and provided support for both the child and the teacher.

Several teachers ate lunch regularly in the lunchroom with the students. We took turns supervising a study table where children of all grade levels brought unfinished work. This was not the best environment for study, but it was not particularly punitive, either. Students viewed this as a chance for some individual help, and we had a crew of "regulars." Teachers also assumed leadership for various extra-curricular activities.

Plans were developed at each school, collaboratively with parents and other interested citizens. At my school, we called this advisory group the Bromwell Council. It deals with issues of accountability, budgetary matters, curriculum, special activities, and so on. This council is comprised of teachers, parents, and citizens--a group of 24 people. These people are definitely included in the decision-making process. This, too, is an indicator of

quality, and is part of the change evolving as a result of the Standards of Excellence.

Is the Standards of Excellence Program a perfect "cure" for all of the problems encountered by teachers at our school? Of course not, but it did provide the impetus for change. I already mentioned the teacher who is fearful and burnt-out. At least she knows that her efforts are supported. Another teacher continues to be reluctant to change. But peer pressure and support have brought minimal adaptation and continues to allow gains for the children in her class. Other schools established different objectives and approaches to meet their needs according to their assessments. The Standards of Excellence Program was district-wide, but it allowed the flexibility necessary for a large and diverse school district.

Standards of Excellence was assimilated into our program. It made the best use of the talents of the staff, and respected the experience and commitment of the teachers. Our principal incorporated the teaching modules so there was no pressure, but a desire to change. Our faculty was highly professional, and he would have met with strong resistance if he had tried to impose other standards upon us. Rather, he shared the data about our students and our school with us and encouraged participation in setting goals and implementing our plan. You can tell as I speak that we felt it was "ours," and we worked very hard to make it succeed. From my point of view, that is the strongest component of the program. The Standards of Excellence Program was designed to support educational objectives, and we were encouraged as we monitored our success. We took great pride in our achievements.

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